

Story Mode: A Narrative Framework Analysis of Downloadable Content in Video Games

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

Holly Barnhart

Thesis Advisor

Rob Brookey

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

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Abstract

Video games are the newest and fastest-growing visual mediums today. Their creation has led to new concepts of storytelling and put the audience at the heart of the action by allowing them to have control of their character's actions. The development of downloadable content, colloquially known as DLC, can further the narrative and character arcs of each main title game. Recent years have shown, however, that game developers have forgone innovation in their DLC in favor of surface-level additions to games, much to gamers frustration. In this paper, I break down the various types of DLC used in the video game industry and highlight the importance of my self-defined Lore-Progressive DLC. Through the analysis of the games *The Last of Us* (2013), *BioShock 2* (2010) and *Fallout 4* (2015) – as well as their respective DLC's *Left Behind* (2014), *Minerva's Den* (2010) and *Far Harbor* (2016) – I use narrative framework analysis to explain how DLC can be used to enhance a main title's narrative and game world.

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I would also like to thank some of my professors who pushed me to be the writer I am today – Chris Flook and Matt Mullins for mentoring me on how to be a good storyteller; and Beth Dalton, Dr. Dom Caristi, Dr. Ashley Donnelly, and the late Dr. James Ruebel for teaching me how to be a scholar.

As always, I want to thank my parents for always believing in me. Love you always.

Table of Contents

Process Analysis Statement.....	2
Introduction.....	4
Defining Downloadable Content and its History.....	7
Narrative Framework Analysis.....	12
Conclusion.....	27
References.....	31

Process Analysis Statement

I didn't immediately know that I wanted to write an analysis paper on a video game topic until last year. Before that time, I saw myself as a filmmaker and thought that my thesis would be an independent film of my making. However, the deeper I moved into my studies the more I realized I wasn't necessarily a filmmaker but a storyteller, or at least a person infatuated by complex narratives. And as I looked at the visual medium industry – film, television, video games, etc. – I saw that video game narratives were not only the most underrated but the most ripe for innovative growth within the industry.

After some thought and research into the video game industry as a whole, I was determined to write a paper highlighting how downloadable content specifically could impact a narrative of a game rather than do a genre analysis. This felt more appropriate considering the many recent scandals and complaints regarding this part of the history. By approaching the use of narrative in downloadable content in a purely narrative light, my hope by addressing this topic is that readers recognize the potential and impact of downloadable content and will view as the evidence they need to push the industry into doing better by their consumers.

Ironically, the hardest challenge I had was finding this evidence for myself. While I was able to find many reputable sources regarding video game structure and aspects of narrative storytelling – from online sources to Bracken's collections to my own advisors recommendations - finding anything related to downloadable content was scarce. Scholarly articles about downloadable content were almost nonexistent. Online sources often solely focused on game reviews or the latest industry controversy rather than a deeper analysis of the medium. And no matter where I looked, I struggled to find any semblance of consistent terminology or definitions

regarding the various types of downloadable content. If you see a relatively short list of references, I guarantee it was not from a lack of trying.

After these many struggles early on, I had to come to terms with the realization that I would have to rely mostly on my own understanding of narrative theory and screenwriting to make my arguments. I even came up with my own term and definition – Lore-Progressive DLC – to describe the type of DLC I wanted to discuss on the most. It was both freeing and terrifying at the same time. Sure, I could use my own words and express my educated opinion on my terms. But as an undergraduate who didn't know much about the gaming industry, who was I to make my own rules?

I was a scholar, that's who I was.

From this project, I learned many things about myself and the nature of thesis-writing in general. To start, a paper is not defined by what a professor or educator puts in a rubric. It is an extension of the writer's knowledge and passion and personality. I had never written anything like this thesis before and to say that I struggled with self-doubt in my abilities as a writer and as an academic is an understatement. But I learned that titles and awards don't have to define content quality. Indeed, the best ideas can come from fresh minds eager to make their perspective known.

It is a lesson I will take with me forever.

Introduction

On March 6, 2012, video game company BioWare should have been celebrating the launch of their final installment to the applauded *Mass Effect* trilogy; instead, they had to combat a PR nightmare. Two weeks prior to the game's release, BioWare accidentally opened a link to the first available downloadable content – more colloquially known in the gaming industry as DLC – to the highly anticipated *Mass Effect 3* on Xbox Live called *From Ashes*. Soon after, the company announced that the content would be available for players on the same launch date as the accompanying title for an additional \$10. If players bought the deluxe edition of the game, the DLC would come free of charge (Schreier, 2012).

Most fans responded with outrage. If the studio already had additional content ready for the launch date, why would they not include it in the main game? Why require players to spend more than a third of the base game's price solely for an additional side mission, a couple new weapons, and a new companion character? Considering the DLC included an alien race integral to the game's lore – the Prothean race – excluding it from the base game appeared to be cheating the game of a core narrative arc.

BioWare associate producer Michael Gamble attempted to alleviate the controversy by explaining the rationale behind the decision. “The Prothean [companion character] is optional content that is certainly designed to appeal to long-time fans, which is why he is part of the [Collector's Edition] offering,” he told gaming website Kotaku. “The content in *From Ashes* was developed by a separate team (after the core game was finished) and not completed until well after the main game went into certification” (Schreier, 2012, ¶ 9). But some gamers found this to be untrue; after digging into the code of the *Mass Effect 3* discs, hackers found evidence that

some elements of the *From Ashes* DLC may have been coded in the original game and later removed. An executive producer for Mass Effect 3, Casey Hudson, denounced these rumors:

The DLC, whether it's day one or not is always going to be sugar on top, the extra. You know, the extra little bits of content that tell side stories. [...] So even though the character we're releasing on day one is a Prothean, which is a part of a race that's important to the lore of Mass Effect, his story is still an interesting kind of side thing, and then you get this character that's good if you want to have him for your first playthrough. But it's always optional. We would never take stuff out of the core game and only have it in DLC. (Kain, 2012, ¶ 3-4)

Does this rationale work for a game that would require a completely separate playthrough to enjoy such additional content? If the content would add to the narrative of the game right away, why not include it at the start so that all players, no matter their financial situation, can enjoy it right at launch? Considering the full DLC cost for Mass Effect 3 would total out to be around \$870, for fans of the series, this doesn't seem like too much to concede (Plunkett, 2012).

The outrage and controversy over the ethics of DLC in video games may seem like a very minor point to those outside of the gaming community. Yet marketing DLC has become a very common practice in the video game industry, and it is one that has both positive and negative consequences for players. Therefore, what goes on in the gaming industry is imperative to understand as the industry moves further and further into a more narrative and immersive art form and as DLC impacts these narratives in the long run.

Gone are the heydays of absent-minded, one-note video games like *Pacman* or *Galaga*, where your goal is simple and unexplained. In their place are complex games such as *Elder*

Scrolls: Skyrim, Uncharted, and Red Dead Redemption. Just as viewers grow attached to characters of a TV show, gamers grow attached to their playable avatars and non-playable characters (NPCs) that make up the game world. Narrative arcs are explored. Worlds are built and lore is developed. Now more than ever, video games have become engaging, complex, interactive media texts, ones where the players have a say in the narrative and want to see it created well. And just as we have ways of critiquing other art and media forms so too do we have experts, both academic and popular press critics, who know how to determine quality video games. Today, that quality arises when gaming developers understand the basics of narrative structure, how to apply it to video game storytelling, and how these narratives should be experienced by the players.

In this paper, I will dissect the specific narrative structure analysis needed for DLC application. First, I will acknowledge the brief and confusing history of DLC to establish a simple understanding of its development and impact on the growth and unique identity of the gaming industry. In accordance with this history, I will organize the various forms of DLC we see in the modern era of gaming – from in-game purchases to loot boxes – in order to narrow my argument’s focus on large form DLC that utilizes story. I will also give this type of story-based content a fitting title and definition as the industry and the scholars who analyze it have yet to officially classify many of the ever-changing forms of DLC.

From here, I reach the main focus of my argument: the narrative framework analysis. I will examine the basic elements of plot structure and the impact of character development on narrative success. Since this thesis is on the use of narrative structure on DLC, I will discuss how this analysis must be applied differently from analysis of base-game narratives – how does DLC enhance an existing narrative while also having its own narrative identity? This examination

continues as I consider the proper use of plot structure and character development through three different critically-acclaimed DLCs connected to three critically-acclaimed main titles: *Left Behind* (2014) for the game *The Last of Us* (2013); *Minerva's Den* (2010) for the game *BioShock 2* (2010); and *Far Harbor* (2016) for the game *Fallout 4* (2015). All of this will conclude with a brief discussion as to why the gaming industry should pursue narrative purpose in their DLC not just for their consumers but for their artistic integrity.

Defining Downloadable Content and Its History

As a generalized term, DLC has roots as far back as the 1980s. The earliest conceptions of DLC emerged with the creation of the GameLine Master Module that accompanied the Atari 2600 in 1982. The package included a telephone cord and subscription to the GameLiner magazine and a binder containing rules to various games available for download. For an annual subscription, gamers could dial the GameLine library and enter a code that would access and download a specific game for an additional charge; after purchase, the player could only play the game up to eight times or until the console was powered down (Vinciguerra, 2007). A similar service was replicated in 1994 when Sega partnered with Time Warner to launch the Sega Channel, a more reliable streaming service that connected through cable instead of phone lines. A monthly subscription allowed players to download up to 50 games at a time, twenty-five cents each, to their Sega Genesis and even allowed users to playtest upcoming titles. Both services struggled to maintain their financial success with these avenues, however, due to limited availability and download capabilities, the services shut down quickly upon their successive releases.

While consoles struggled to utilize successful download capabilities, the rise of the internet in the 1990s revolutionized the concept of online streaming. Before PC distributors caught on to such capabilities, online gamers created modifications, colloquially known as “mods,” to existing games and sold their software online to other players. Developers embraced this practice and created games that could incorporate similar types of downloads. One of the more notable examples was the 1997 game *Total Annihilation* developed by Cavedog Entertainment which released new maps, units, missions, and worlds every month to be added to the gaming experience (Bonilla, 2017). This trend would continue in the popular sphere under franchises like *Warcraft* and *Diablo* that revolutionized the DLC market by utilizing large expansion packs meant to continue and add to the plot of the game.

Online functions were eventually included into home consoles starting in 1999 with the Sega Dreamcast, which launched its own internet service, SegaNet, on the console at the same time; the specialized internet service allowed players to have access to free online enabled games. This model improved with the creation of Xbox Live in 2001 which connected gamers under a singular network and didn’t require a separate internet service (Vinciguerra, 2017).¹

As graphics capabilities and data storage in gaming increased, it became harder for internet users to quickly access DLC from these online services and platforms, however. Dial-up services, while secure through phone lines, had slow processing speeds at only 56Kbps – not fast enough to download content online. The installation of broadband in most homes in the mid-2000s, however, gave consumers higher download and upload speeds of at least 5Mbps that

¹ Note that other gaming consoles experimented with online capabilities prior to the ones mentioned, although their main intention was to create integral changes to the system outside of accessing DLC. The systems referenced used services intended to connect consumers with a corresponding DLC market.

accommodated the improving market for video games and allowed for widespread consumption for gamers (CERIAS, 2019).

Today, every major console has some form of online downloadable service, from PlayStation Live to Nintendo Switch Online. These services allow players to connect on multiplayer servers, buy games through an online store, and access the various forms of DLC available to them.

For this paper, I will only focus on DLC that was added on to a previously released game and directly effects, or was created to effect, the narrative of the base game to which it is applied. This modern definition of DLC will also not apply to regularly updated content where developers continually modify their base game with improved and added content, as such additions are often involuntary to the player (ex. Minecraft updates). We therefore need to separate the types of downloadable content based on their purchasing methods and in-game implications.

The two main types of purchases are in-game purchases (or in-app for mobile devices) and external purchases. In-game purchases refer to content bought during gameplay or while using a home screen; external purchases, in opposition, are made after exiting the game and buying the content from an outside source (*In-Game Purchases*, 2011). While both purchasing methods often offer the same/similar content, their convenience often determines their purpose. In-game purchases could allow a player to easily obtain a new weapon they want to use for online battles or could give a player access to locked levels if they've completed what they wanted from the base game installment. External purchases are often utilized if the content being bought takes a considerable time to download. It could also include redeemable codes bundled with the purchase of merchandise to reward players for supporting the game's brand outside of the actual gaming experience.

An extension of both purchasing methods (although mostly external) is DLC found solely through paid membership or subscription exclusives. Players with these monthly or annual subscriptions have special access to various types of DLC including cosmetic additions and various gameplay functions (e.g. bonus levels, missions, characters). An example would be the recent new membership package for the *Elder Scrolls* series called *Elder Scrolls Online Plus*. For a monthly subscription fee, ESO Plus members have free access to in-game DLC-packs (excluding major expansions), free or discounted items in the in-game stores (the ones immersed in the game, that is) and even a monthly gift of in-game currency. The downside to these types of arrangements, ESO Plus included, is that these gifts are often taken away once the subscription ends and can only be regained by either re-subscribing or purchasing the content like non-subscribers (Murnane, 2018).

Various types of individual purchases and additions can be acquired either through in-game or external means. The most common purchases include specific levels/maps, characters, weapons, and appearance upgrades: it can be acquiring a new song to play on *Guitar Hero*, a new stage and character on *Smash Ultimate*, or a new *Fortnite* dancing emote. Often these in-game purchases require in-game currency (coins, diamonds, etc.) which can be obtained slowly through many hours of gameplay; to speed up the process, however, gamers are often given the in-game option to purchase in-game currency using their real-world currency (*In-Game Purchases*, 2011).

Microtransactions such as these can also come in the form of loot boxes/loot crates or the traditionally Asian title, gacha games. These DLCs are similar in that they also provide gamers with traditionally cosmetic additions to their games – characters, outfits, weapons, experience points – but differ in how they are required. The key element of loot boxes is that players

purchase them without knowing the specifics of what they are purchasing, similar to how trading cards are sold in packs; they can contain a few assorted items of value but players have no control over what exactly they will get. Standard loot boxes/gacha games contain virtual items that cannot be traded with other players, forcing the player to forever hold onto an item they may not want. Tradeable loot boxes allow for this transfer between players through in-game online exchange. Kompu Gacha takes the tradeable loot boxes one step further by allowing players to trade multiple unwanted loot box items (often of the same value) for a rarer item of higher value (Schwiddessen, 2018). No matter the description or function, the common intention of these additions is meant to be purely cosmetic or to minimally enhance gameplay mechanics and strategies.

The main focus of this paper, however, will be on DLC found in bulk expansion packs. These packs usually contain the similar cosmetic additions as the individual purchases mentioned above but also offer new or continuing plot lines, NPCs, and involved missions that take significant time to play. These types of DLC can be added on to continuing gameplay narratives, such as major expansions found in Bethesda games like *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim*, or can create separate adventures and scenarios that fall within the same universe of the game, such as Telltale Games' DLC miniseries *The Walking Dead: Michonne*.

The specific terminology of this DLC is still unnamed so, for simplicity, I have taken it upon myself to define this content as Lore-Progressive DLC based on the content's creative purpose. From a surface-level perspective, this DLC appears no different than small-form DLC packs that add individual levels or game maps. Lore-Progressive DLC, however, is created to focus less on adding small chunks of gameplay and more heavily on further developing the narrative of the established game and expanding the lore of the game's world. The new

maps/levels may offer new villains and scenarios that challenge the existing morals of the player's avatar. The new NPCs can explore a different type of relationship that brings out a new facet to the protagonist's personality. Lore-Progressive DLC offers more substance to their base game in the form of plot and character development; as my paper focused on the narrative impact of DLC, this distinction is notable moving forward.

It is important to remember, however, that the definitions of DLC are constantly changing. As the purchasing capabilities of DLC becomes more complex – real money, in-game currency, subscriptions, merchandise – so too does their nature and usage. And while the focus of this paper is not centered around them, growing controversy and regulations regarding microtransactions may also be a factor in the future for determining the types of DLC that is developed and perfected. So long as video games lie in the enigmatic middle between art and technology, defining the precise types of DLC will always shift.

Narrative Framework Analysis

Just as there are ever-changing definitions to DLC there are a few different ways to break down narrative structure in video games and other mediums. For this analysis, however, I will be using the approach found in the book *The Ultimate Guide to Video Game Writing and Design* (Dille & Platten, 2007). The book lays out a general plot outline in the form of an equation and defines elements of plot that are important to its structure, no matter the type of narrative: *Plot = Dramatic Tension (Conflict x Stakes/Time = Hero Jeopardy)* (Dille & Platten, 2007, p. 26). The type of *conflict* – consequential event(s) that moves the story forward – the intensity of the *stakes* of the conflict, and *time* sensitivity of the conflict all effect the *hero's jeopardy* – what the

protagonist is willing or able to risk when ultimately faced with the conflict's results at the end of the narrative. *Dramatic tension* in this scenario relates to how the above factors impact the characters' decisions by establishing the gravity of their situations. These points manifest into a plot that encompasses the narrative. The equation can be applied to linear and nonlinear, interactive narration – a predetermined story that requires the player to make simple actions to advance it – and interactive narrative – a branching story that requires player decisions and interaction.

The type of conflict used in a story can vary but tend to follow a few core themes. The “Man vs. Man” conflict is the most common – it's the hero against the villain, good versus evil. It appears in almost every genre imaginable, from FPS to RPG. The “Man vs. Nature” conflict relates to the environment as the protagonist must face the weather, the animals, and the natural conditions; the trope can also include humanoid figures such as zombies as long as they are a part of the environment. On a similar and yet opposite spectrum, the “Man vs. Machine” trope follows the hero's fight against technology such as a self-aware super-computer that often works against the wills of man. A “Man vs. System” narrative goes deeper and suggests the hero is at war with the world or social structure they live in. This could exist in a *Matrix*-like scenario or in a narrative where the hero struggles against a social norm, such as the institution of slavery. The “Man vs. Self” conflict follows a character at war with his/her own demons or fears and is often tied to other types of conflicts. These include the “Man vs. Destiny” narrative, where the hero fights against their perceived path, and the “Man vs. Past” narrative, where the hero struggles to reconcile regrets or losses.

Just as there are common types of climaxes there are common types of stakes found in most narratives. Perhaps the most common for its natural intensity is the “Life or Death” stake,

an all-encompassing threat that can include the life and death of the hero, the side characters, or even the world. “Love or Loss” can be related if it is the loved one’s life at stake, but this stake could simply be a romantic plot where the hero either ends up with or loses the affection of the love interest. Vaguer in premise is the “Happiness or Sadness” stake which can encompass a variety of scenarios (the hero is or isn’t satisfied with the result in a majority of plots found in today’s media) but is often used in simpler narratives as a low-stakes option. Another ambiguous premise is the “Triumph or Defeat” stake – the hero either achieves the goal or doesn’t, stops the threat or doesn’t – but, based on the terminology used, often relates to either a personal struggle between two individuals or a global conflict between good and evil. The “Wealth or Poverty” premise may seem to be a shallow goal but is often tied to gameplay elements or accumulating funds to get the hero out of their impoverished station; a strong example would be the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise and how wealth is used as a power mantra. The most internal stakes option is the “Security or Instability” outcome. By the end of the narrative, is the world still in chaos or has peace been established? Did the hero find inner peace, either through self-exploration or a supportive relationship, or are they still in emotional turmoil? Used properly, this stake can add nuance to a plot and can enhance other stakes present in the narrative.

But these above plot elements are relatively simplistic in nature and don’t necessarily determine the quality of the overarching narrative. To create a more complex narrative that can be better enjoyed by fans and critics alike, stories should have a hefty variety of conflicts and stakes to enhance the narrative experience. Is there a mixture of strong external conflicts, such as the tension between warring tribes, and internal conflicts, such as a character’s battle with addiction? Are there many things at stake, from the hero’s triumph over the antagonist to the

same hero's relationship status? Having many elements to the plot allows the narrative to expand from a one-note arc to a multi-faceted arc that could have various outcomes.

Unlike most other mediums, video games also have an added challenge to their narratives: user interaction. While watching a film or television show, we connect to characters in a passive manner and don't expect involvement in the storyline. Video games, however, require attention from the gamer who expects to have a say in their narrative, even if the storyline is linear and predestined. The interaction between the player and their avatar offers an active connection as opposed to a passive one and makes for a more investing narrative. Game designers must consider how this interaction affects pacing and action, dialogue and cut scenes, so the narrative flows naturally with the gameplay. Just as the mantra of film and television writing is "Don't tell what you can show," the mantra for video game writing is "Don't show what you can play" (Dille & Platten, 2007, p. 34).

For Lore-Progressive DLC, this narrative framework analysis becomes more complicated as the narrative of the DLC is often tied to the core themes and tones of the base game. It may appear that we cannot independently analyze Lore-Progressive DLC narrative structure because of its limitations but the opposite is true. There is plenty of DLC that add to the narrative of their base game while also being a stand-alone project complete with the above conditions. In fact, it will be my contention that the quality of this content can be determined by how well it extends the narrative elements of the base game.

Let's talk about three modern, valid examples: *The Last of Us: Left Behind* (2014); *BioShock 2: Minerva's Den* (2010); and *Fallout 4: Far Harbor* (2016).²

² I chose these examples based on how they reflected my personal critique as well as how they received high acclaim from industry critics, *IGN* and *Metacritic*.

The Last of Us is a 2013 third-person, action-adventure survival game developed by studio Naughty Dog. At the start of the game, an infection caused by a mutant brain fungus is spread across the human population and those infected become ravenous and deadly; 20 years after the infection, the world is in disarray with no apparent sign or hope for a cure in sight. Players take control of protagonist Joel, a rugged 50-something smuggler living in a militarized district during the apocalypse who is assigned to smuggle a feisty 14-year-old girl named Ellie cross-country to a group of activists called the Fireflies. Near the beginning of their journey, Joel and his partner Tess discover that Ellie had been bitten by an infected individual a few weeks prior to meeting her – a sure-fire death sentence – but hasn't developed any symptoms of the disease. They discover that Ellie is being smuggled to a Firefly hospital across the country in hopes of using her to find a cure. After Tess dies early in the journey, Joel and Ellie are forced to travel cross-country, fighting off both infected and people alike. During their journey, these two protagonists – a man who lost his only daughter and a girl with no family to begin with – form an unlikely familial bond. Eventually, the duo make it to the Firefly hospital only for Joel to discover that the Fireflies will likely kill Ellie when they remove the infected tissue from her brain to find a cure. To maintain the only meaningful relationship he has left, Joel kills the Fireflies and rescues Ellie, ending humanity's chance for a cure. The game ends when the pair travel back to a safe house found earlier in the journey.

The game follows deep themes related to the previously-mentioned conflicts and stakes. The conflicts are both “Man vs. Man” and “Man vs. Nature” as Joel and Ellie defend themselves against the environment (infected, dilapidated buildings) and men (military, raiders, cannibals). For Joel, it is also a “Man vs. Past” narrative as he comes to grips with the loss of his daughter and how it affects his relationship with Ellie. In the end, it also becomes a “Man vs. Destiny” or,

in this case, “Man vs. Someone Else’s Destiny” story when Joel fights to save Ellie from her intended fate, whether she wants him to save her or not. There are many stakes tied to these narratives from “Life or Death” to “Love or Loss”, although the love in question is father-daughter companionship as opposed to romantic interest. The ambiguous stake of “Happiness or Sadness” comes at the end of the narrative when Joel’s happiness conflicts with Ellie’s – is it better for Joel to be happy with Ellie as his new daughter or for Ellie to be happy dying for what she hopes is a good cause?

The DLC component, *Left Behind*, also follows these themes while also forming its own identity outside of the base game. The narrative, this time, focuses solely on Ellie as the player guides her through two completed parts of her story that are only briefly mentioned in the base game: the part of the game where she must take care on an injured and incapacitated Joel (only alluded to after a jump forward in time) and a flashback sequence to when she and her best friend were first infected (only mentioned briefly by Ellie in dialogue). The DLC jumps back and forth between the two to highlight their similarities and lasting impact on Ellie as a character. In the flashback sequence, Ellie and her elusive friend (and crush) Riley explore an abandoned mall on the edges of the militarized zone and goof off like teenagers: having water gun fights, pulling pranks, playing arcade games. It is the one portion of the game, including the base title, where there isn’t the apparent threat of the infected until the very end of the sequence when both Ellie and Riley are bitten while escaping the mall. The fast forward section starts immediately after Joel’s injury when Ellie scrounges around a different mall looking for medical supplies to heal him. It relies less on cut scenes than the flashback sequence and more on actionable gameplay as Ellie avoids and fights off both the infected and local raiders.

Following the tone and style of the base game, *Left Behind* utilizes similar conflicts and stakes. It is both a “Man vs. Nature” and “Man vs. Man” narrative as it pertains to Ellie fighting people and infected, with an added layer of time sensitivity as we know Joel is suffering and needs medical attention. The stakes include “Life or Death” for Ellie and Joel and “Love or Loss” for Ellie and Riley, respectively.

And yet the main difference between the two – the base game and the DLC – is that these elements directly affect Ellie’s character arc, not Joel’s. While the base game was promoted as a dual-protagonist narrative, the player controls Joel for most of the title and has directly seen his backstory and his motivations from the beginning; for all intents and purposes, it is Joel’s narrative. *Left Behind*, however, focuses on Ellie’s backstory and personal struggle. Her “Man vs. Past” conflict forces her to relive her tragedy and highlights her “Security or Instability” stakes – if she doesn’t save Joel, she will be alone again, just like how she was alone after losing Riley. By placing the focus of the narrative on Ellie rather than Joel, the *Left Behind* DLC separates itself from the trend of the base game while also enhancing it by better understanding Ellie’s motivation and desire to feel needed.

BioShock 2 is an FPS, sci-fi game developed by 2K Games in 2010. The first game in the franchise, *BioShock*, takes players into the history of the underwater city known as Rapture, a utopia built in the 1940s by business magnate Andrew Ryan to escape the rules of traditional governance. From audio tapes found throughout *BioShock* we learn that this utopia fell apart around the mid-1950s when one of Rapture’s gangsters, Frank Fontaine, creates mutated little girls known as Little Sisters by injecting them with ADAM, a chemical that can give regular humans extraordinary powers (telekinesis, shooting fire out of your hands, etc.). A civil war

consumes Rapture and Ryan creates mutated men called Big Daddies designed to protect the Little Sisters from ADAM-addicted individuals looking to harm them.

BioShock 2 starts two years before the first game with the player in control of a Big Daddy named Subject Delta protecting his Little Sister, Eleanor. Eleanor is eventually taken away from Subject Delta by her mother, Sofia Lamb. After securing her daughter, Lamb uses an ADAM-fueled plasmid to mind control Subject Delta forcing him to kill himself. Ten years later, Delta is revived by Little Sisters under the control of Eleanor. Eleanor explains to Delta that her mother, Sofia Lamb, intends to inject her with so much ADAM that she will become the ideal embodiment of a fully-realized human; through the genetic memory of ADAM, Eleanor would have the memories of all of Rapture which, according to Lamb, will be the end of “The Self.” Delta, still emotionally tied to Eleanor as her protector, works to find Eleanor and save her from Lamb. Delta gets help from Brigid Tenenbaum, the Little Sisters’ keeper, and shady businessman Augustus Sinclair as he travels through Rapture fending off ADAM-addicted Splicers and Lamb’s many allies. Along the way, the player can come across other Little Sisters and Big Daddies and may choose to harvest the ADAM off the Little Sisters (which will give them the ability to create powerful plasmids to use in battle) or save them from their inhuman nature (which comes with other perks if you save enough of them). In the end, Eleanor and Delta manage to escape Rapture while Lamb uses explosives to destroy large portions of the city. Depending on the choices the player makes prior – Did Delta kill or spare Lamb’s allies? Did he harvest or save the Little Sisters? – the end of the game either shows Eleanor holding Delta as he dies in peace or harvesting Delta’s own ADAM so she can pursue world domination.

The main conflicts of *BioShock 2* are, again, both “Man vs. Man” and “Man vs. Nature” as Subject Delta faces Lamb and her allies brutal combat; the “Man vs. Nature” conflict can be a

bit of stretch here if you do not consider the irrational, mutated splicers to be fully human or conscious of their actions. Both Delta and Eleanor experience internal “Man vs. Past” arcs as they work to reconnect after years apart. Since the game world exists in a ravished dystopia, there is also an element of “Man vs. System” wherein the System refers to the utopian ideologies of Rapture (both Ryan’s and Lamb’s views) and Delta’s resistance (or lack thereof) to ADAM harvesting that feeds the city’s destruction. The player’s choice in this matter could also create a more existential “Man vs. Self” narrative if the player feels that they themselves, through their connection to Delta, are “addicted” to using ADAM to succeed in the game. Many stakes come out of this narrative as well, notably “Life or Death” as Delta learns that he will die if he does not find Eleanor within a certain time frame. “Love or Loss,” like *The Last of Us*, comes into play in the father-daughter relationship Delta and Eleanor share; the pair will do anything to avoid being separated again. “Triumph or Defeat” and “Security or Instability” stakes are perhaps the most relevant stakes applied to the game. Either Delta and Eleanor will defeat Lamb and the impurities of Rapture or they will be swallowed up in the chaos of the dystopia. Only by escaping to the surface will the pair be able to live together in peace.

Although *BioShock 2*’s DLC, *Minerva’s Den*, takes place with different protagonists and antagonists, the world of Rapture still persists and forces the DLC’s narrative to follow similar anecdotal trends. During the same time frame as the base narrative of *BioShock 2*, *Minerva’s Den* follows another Big Daddy named Subject Sigma, one of the earliest Big Daddy models made in Rapture. Sigma is sent by Tenenbaum to help Reed Porter, the creator of Rapture’s supercomputer that runs most of the city’s systems and electronics. The computer, named The Thinker, is under the control of one of Porter’s former colleagues, Reed Wahl, an ADAM-addicted mathematician who thinks the Thinker is not being used to its full potential and seeks to

increase its power and influence on the city. Sigma is tasked with infiltrating Thinker's mainframe, retrieving its blueprints, and escaping Rapture in hopes of replicating the machine and using it to find a cure for ADAM addiction. Throughout Sigma's journey, the player learns that Porter had originally designed Thinker not to run Rapture but to emulate the voice and personality of his late wife Pearl. When Sigma reaches the Thinker's core, we learn that Porter had been arrested by Andrew Ryan's men prior to Sigma's creation and has not been talking to the player at all. Instead, Porter himself was turned into Subject Sigma, the player's avatar, and used the Thinker to show prerecorded messages to Sigma to guide it to the blueprints. In the end, Tenenbaum and Sigma escape during the explosion caused in the base game and Tenenbaum cures Sigma back to his former identity, Porter, who then visits his wife's grave and finally lets her go.

As a parallel narrative to the events of *BioShock 2*, *Minerva's Den* utilizes many of the same conflicts and themes as the base game. It is still both a "Man vs. Man" and "Man vs. Nature" narrative since Sigma fights off the same types of Splicers and Big Daddies as Delta does in the original title; *Minerva's Den* does have the added conflict of "Man vs. Machine", however, since it technically combats against the Thinker while it is under Wahl. And although they are different, the antagonists are still one individual each with their own misguided and irrational ideologies. The stakes are very much the same as well – "Life or Death", "Triumph or Defeat" – with the similarities stemming from play styles and environments.

Where *Minerva's Den* differs is in the main emotional connection that develops between the player-controlled protagonist and the main ally. In the base game, Delta and Eleanor develop a strong familial bond tied to their shared past as protector and protected. Sigma, however, does not have this same attachment until the realization that Sigma has been Porter all along. Only

then do we understand that this narrative arc has been a different type of “Man vs. Past” conflict to that of Delta and Eleanor. Delta and Eleanor were fighting to reconnect with one another after missing so many years together. Porter, however, was fighting to regain the memories of his wife that he knows he will never get back. This conflict creates a different kind of “Happiness or Sadness” stake than that of the base game: instead of finding happiness through another person, Porter must find happiness through himself by accepting the loss of his wife. *Minerva’s Den* is then impactful to the overarching world of Rapture not only by exploring the histories and motivations of the many heroes, villains and anti-heroes of the series – from Sofia Lamb to Brigid Tenenbaum to Andrew Ryan – but by rooting the game to a certain level of realism not often found in the sci-fi genre: overcoming the stages of grief.

Fallout 4 is an open-world action RPG developed by Bethesda Game Studios in 2015. The main narrative takes place in the retro-futuristic year 2077 in Boston, MA during a nuclear war between the United States and China. At the start of the game, our protagonist, named individually by the player and hereby referred to as the Sole Survivor³, is given access to one of many bomb shelters, known as Vaults, made around the world; the Sole Survivor is then forced to take their husband or wife (depending on the Sole Survivor’s gender) and infant son Shaun to the shelter when China drops massive atomic bombs nearby; the family is forced into cryopreservation to wait out the nuclear effects. The Sole Survivor then awakens 210 years later to discover their husband/wife has been killed, their son has been kidnapped by mysterious individuals and they are the only survivor of their Vault.

³ This name was chosen because of its canonical attachment to the game’s fan-created Wiki page. *Far Harbor* (2019).

The main story sees the Sole Survivor enter this new irradiated Boston known to the people as the Commonwealth in search of Shaun. Along the way, the Sole Survivor meets various individuals from warring factions: The Institute, a mysterious underground organization of scientists known for creating androids called Synths and using them to replace humans in the Commonwealth; The Brotherhood of Steel, a militaristic organization determined to destroy all Synths and organize the Commonwealth under martial law; the Railroad, revolutionaries that give refuge to vulnerable Synths running from both the Brotherhood and the Institute; and the Minute Men, militia forces that work to protect the people of the Commonwealth from both the irradiated creatures that roam as well as other organizations that seek to destroy their autonomy. At various points in the game, the player must decide with whom they wish for the Sole Survivor to align. During their journey, the Sole Survivor must fight off mutated animals like mole-rats and mirelurks as well as raiders. Eventually, the Sole Survivor makes their way into the elusive Institute (with help from whichever faction he/she has aligned) where they discover that their son, Shaun, is much older than anticipated and is now the leader of the Institute. Upon this realization, the Sole Survivor must decide if they wish to fully align themselves with their son and the Institute or if they wish to see it destroyed. The end of the main game either results in the destruction of the Institute entirely or the destruction of any of the other notable factions.

While there are many side quests and characters to encounter that also relate to the narrative of the game, the main storyline has very distinct conflicts and stakes that appear at different times in the story. *Fallout 4* is technically a “Man vs. Man” when the player chooses to side with a faction as well as when the Sole Survivor is forced to kill raiders. Similarly, it is mostly a “Man vs. Nature” story as the Sole Survivor must fight off grotesque creatures and irradiated fog to survive their journey (all tied to the common “Life or Death” stake). The

underlying conflict, however, is the “Man vs. System” scenario since, for most of the game, the player is lead to believe that the Institute organization is the real threat and cause of conflict in the Commonwealth; indeed, the other factions appear to have their strongest grievances with the Institute over each other. This conflict is flipped on its head when the Sole Survivor discovers that their son is the leader of a misunderstood organization seeking to save the world from itself by replacing problem individuals with Synths that would stabilize that region; in this sense, the new “System” could be any of the other groups at war with the Institute.

From an individual perspective, though, the Sole Survivor’s journey is overwhelmed by internal conflict created from losing their estranged son to adapting to their new environment. In many ways, *Fallout 4* is much more of a “Man vs. Self” narrative since the player must decide which choices to make regarding alliances and even romantic interests. Each decision impacts the character development of the Sole Survivor, and the player is forced to embody their character to determine what kind of personality they will have – will it reflect their own personality or will they create a new persona for this avatar? Another 4th-wall conflict for the player is the “Man vs. Destiny” trope, although this could be a stretch with regards to narrative connection. If the player wishes to avoid the main story and focus on side missions, that is their choice; however, there will come a time when the side quests will run out or will be limited until the player moves on with the main story and/or decides to follow a faction. If the player’s intent is to connect their personality with their character, a point could be made that the Sole Survivor themselves have decided to avoid their future. This fear of the future, then, could be tied to a “Man vs. Past” conflict wherein the Sole Survivor must come to grips with their loss and find a way to move past the initial shock that things will never go back to the way they were; even if the Sole Survivor sides with Shaun, Shaun is now considerably older than the Sole Survivor and

no longer the son they expected. This feeling of loss and uncertainty directly relates to the “Love or Loss” and “Security or Instability” stakes present in the narrative – without Shaun, will the Sole Survivor ever find peace in this new world? Will they ever be able to accept that their life will never be the same?

One of the many branching side missions occurs through the implementation of *Fallout 4*'s DLC, *Far Harbor*. In this DLC, the Sole Survivor is sent by the Valentine Detective Agency to investigate the disappearance of Kasumi Nakano. Kasumi's parents tell the Sole Survivor that their daughter believes herself to be a Synth and has decided to leave her home and seek refuge at the island of Far Harbor. The Sole Survivor arrives at a completely new location outside of the base game's map and gets caught up in the feud between three more distinct factions: The Children of Atom, overzealous individuals who believe the nuclear fog comes from a spiritual entity named Atom; Acadia, a Synth refuge that seeks to maintain peace on the island; and the normal citizens of Far Harbor who struggle to keep the heavy nuclear fog at bay to survive. While the Sole Survivor's task is to bring Kasumi back to her parents they ultimately get caught up in the conflict and, like the base game, must choose with whom they will ally. The Sole Survivor eventually learns that the leader of Acadia, an early Synth model named DiMA, has set up fail safes – an active nuclear missile that could destroy The Children of Atom and a power surge that shut down Far Harbor's air filters – to ensure Acadia's survival. After learning this information, the Sole Survivor can choose various outcomes based on which group they connect with the most; if they have created a relationship with one of the base game factions, such as the Institute or Brotherhood, they can also enlist their help. The multiple endings also affect Kasumi who, in the end, either stays convinced she is a Synth or is persuaded to come back home believing herself to be human.

As a direct narrative extension of the base game, *Far Harbor* is directly connected to the conflicts and stakes of *Fallout 4*. The player can choose to either experience *Far Harbor* right away before they have made any alliances, later on when they have established some outside relationships, or even after the base game is finished when their loyalties are determined. No matter what stage the Sole Survivor is at on their journey, there maintains a “Man vs. Nature” conflict related to the various ghouls and nuclear creatures they must kill to survive. And if the *Far Harbor* DLC is itself a distraction from the main quest it can still be a part of the “Man vs. Destiny” trope presented earlier. The “Life or Death” and “Security or Instability” stakes are still present, if not more so considering the tension between the island’s factions.

And yet what connects *Far Harbor* to the previously mentioned DLC is that, while it is directly tied to the gameplay and outcomes of the base game, it has a narrative flow outside of the main conflicts. *Far Harbor* more deeply explores the ideologies of The Children of Atom, throwaway characters in the base game as religious zealots the player can laugh at. Similarly, DiMA and Acadia show a different and more devious side of Synths almost to the level of the Institute itself. The main conflicts of the DLC separate themselves from the Sole Survivor’s overarching quest to find Shaun and instead explores other forms of tension that appear outside of the Commonwealth. In many ways, the Sole Survivor character could be replaced with any other detective in Valentine’s Detective Agency, perhaps even Valentine himself, and the narrative impact on the world of *Fallout 4* would remain the same.

By extending the narrative exploration to locations and main characters outside of the Commonwealth, *Far Harbor* works to expand the potential of *Fallout 4*’s world-building in a similar fashion to how *Minerva’s Den* extended *BioShock 2*. The way it layers tensions between factions is similar to the base game but also exhibits more intimacy. The direct correlation of

each group's actions, along with their forced close proximity to one another, creates more suspense than the base game; it's immediate impact to the game's populace is similar to how local politics and federal politics motivate populations differently. The way the Sole Survivor reacts to this different environment can deeply impact how they perceive their internal (intimate) and external (big-picture) struggles. In this way, *Far Harbor* is brilliant example of how DLC can influence character motivations and audience playstyles by using intimate storylines that add to the base game's over-arching narrative.

The key takeaway from these analyses is that these examples of Lore-Progressive DLC offer insight into the game world in which they reside while also making a claim for their own autonomy. Whether a gamer decides to play this type of DLC is completely up to them and optional in principle. In order to experience a broader spectrum of understanding within the game world, however, playing DLC such as this is necessary. Lore-Progressive DLC allows players to look at characters and social situations differently. It allows players to consider different outcomes and choices moving forward in their main title. In the end, utilizing DLC such as this only enhances the game-playing experience and entices players to learn more about the worlds in which they participate.

Conclusion

Downloadable content (DLC) is an ever-changing medium that has evolved and expanded with each passing year. DLC offers freshness to a game and can give that extra bit of immersion for a fan looking to enjoy every ounce of content from their favorite series. And just like any artistic medium, DLC has become a key element of gaming narrative by exploring

character development, extending the history within a game world, and adding new challenging scenarios. No longer are video games only capable of being simple, goal-driven button-pressers; today, they can immerse gamers into worlds and stories that exude both smiles and tears.

As we have discussed in this paper, the quality of Lore-Progressive DLC is determined by how well gaming developers understand the basics of narrative structure. When they understand how to apply this analysis to their games and how they want their narratives to be appropriately experienced by players, developers can create DLC that makes a lasting impact on fans and critics alike. The key narrative components of Lore-Progressive DLC should both offer fresh discernment into their respective game worlds while also showing clear distinctions in their narratives that give them autonomy. Utilizing DLC in this way, therefore, enhances the game-playing experience and encourages deeper exploration within the narratives and the game worlds alike.

There are still limitations related to my analysis, of course. The progression of the medium will likely create new types of narratives and methods of interaction for gamers that further blur the lines between DLC types. Similarly, just as painting and sculpture have stretched the boundaries of their mediums and force experts to question what defines each artistic medium, so too are video games, films, and television breaking molds to create hybrid art forms ripe for new types of criticism (consider the Netflix film *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*). In this study, I only executed one type of narrative analysis as well; there could of course be other ways to define DLC narrative that offer opposing viewpoints to my own.

But these limitations of narrative analysis do not and should not mitigate the controversy at the core of DLC development today, when profit is more important than the game experience. For example, the basic arguments from game developers like BioWare for excluding DLC like

From Ashes from a main narrative like *Mass Effect 3* are often defensive in nature. Developers' and companies' timidity to give a real reason is obvious: they don't want to lose consumers. The sad reality is that the DLC market is both broad and aggressive. As new technology emerges and studios find new ways to expand their games, new DLC will ultimately emerge to claim the empty space. But the common purpose for these expansions is not to fully enhance gameplay or even to make a quality addition. Like any other industry, DLC is created to make money, additional revenue for companies and staff that spend years and countless resources on each project.

This is where the industry forgets itself and its roots as an artistic medium. Video games were not created to entice consumers to purchase over-priced, decent content. Video games were made during the modern exploration of technology and the rise of the Internet to directly interact with beings outside the self, whether this be a computer-generated creature or another individual. Over the years, they have evolved past mere software to show storytelling potential and can now be classified as art like any other book, painting, or film. Businesses should therefore strive to invigorate artistic growth by focusing on storytelling, new game mechanics, and advanced technology. While profits must be made to survive financially, when capitalism inhibits creative innovation in exchange for reliable revenue, the industry must be pushed to change for the experiential benefit of the consumer.

As we analyze the video game industry in the future, we must acknowledge the antagonizing philosophies of business and art if we are to overcome the dichotomy. To emphasize art and narrative as the driving force for the video game industry, critics should consider aspects of narrative theory such as plot structure and character development in their analyses of games to determine their success and impact on the medium. Theorists should focus

more analysis on the narrative breakdown of gaming genres and tropes to encourage experts and developers to consider story elements in their DLC. New storytelling methods and gameplay will only make these theories more advanced and, furthermore, force art critics to take the medium seriously. Most importantly, however, if fans want their games and DLC, Lore-Progressive or not, to be meaningful and worth the cost, they should demand it from developers and not settle for less. After all, if developers aren't going to make enticing games for consumers, then why are they making games in the first place?

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